

Balancing Cultural Tourism

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The concept of cultural tourism for Indigenous communities brings up a multitude of ethical questions and possible pitfalls. How can Indigenous peoples balance and maintain their cultural heritage with cultural tourism and earn an income from this exchange? Is it fair to say you can or can't utilize your culture to earn an income and who is to be the judge of this? What are the pro's and con's of pointing out obvious issues that Indigenous peoples face in their daily lives on how they may earn a living, how they share their heritage and how they may want to maintain their traditional way of life. I ask these questions because they are challenging even for Natives who are aware of how world economics and the tourist industry impacts our regions. As tourism becomes more prevalent across the Arctic, should Natives be aware of how this industry will impact their region, or should we let things go as they are? I know I have asked too many questions, but this is for a discussion of ideas and to think about ways to address them.

My first question asked about the balance of finance and heritage. How can this be balanced when there are numerous examples that show it doesn't work for a group, unless they have complete control over what is said, shown and shared with outsiders. One of the challenges is how outside investors influence what is shown, shared and used from a culture to attract tourists. As indigenous groups get more involved with various degrees of success in the tourist industry, they need to be aware of how money changes both the expectations and understanding of what is acceptable.

As a Native growing up in a remote village on Kodiak Island, Alaska I have seen the trend of cultural tourism start and stop on Kodiak. I

worked for a camp that began with the intent of providing visitors with a life experience living, camping and learning about our local Native culture. This part of the camp failed because there wasn't a tie, nor a link to a community or individuals who felt strongly about sharing their heritage. Nor was there an awareness of who Kodiak Natives were. This camp was established with the intent to earn an income based on the sole fact that our culture would draw tourists. At the time very little information was available about Alutiiq history. As we learned, this was the camp's downfall because without world recognition or knowledge about our culture, why would anyone want to bother spending money to come to a place that isn't known for its cultural heritage? Other reasons the camp failed include the expense, lack of comfort for the tourist and lack of experience by those designing and implementing the camp. The cultural camp did not fit into the normal expectations for an expensive remote stay at an exotic locale. Most visitors expect a warm bedroom, not bunkroom, limited number of bugs, nothing dead to see or strange foods you had to look at and then eat. This may appeal to us but it was too much for visitors and more than they expect to see or experience.

Another major reason the camp failed was the cultural divide between the two cultures, which have different expectations and understandings of what is accepted and acceptable. Our cultural expectations were and are still extremely different from other cultures. Most Natives who live in a rural setting still follow many traditions and can do without all the amenities that tourists expect. You need to go to the bathroom go out in the woods, just watch out for bugs and bears, they may bite

you. After four years of trying to make cultural tourism work the camp changed and took on the role as a cultural camp for local Natives and their youth. It is now managed by a Tribal Council who are focused on providing a venue for local Natives to pass on their traditional science, language, dance and stories from elders to our youth. This is where I feel cultural tourism, if they chose to do this again, could work in very limited numbers and for a very select audience. Most tourists want to have fun, relax, sleep in a warm bed, and to not work very hard while learning something new. As a tourist they only get a birds eye view of Native life, and most are not truly interested in living this way themselves. It is very important to understand and clarify the expectations on both sides, however it still takes a very dedicated group to make cultural tourism work.

As for who can and can't deal in cultures, it is up to the group as a whole, but the problem Indigenous peoples have is they don't always agree as a group and it takes just one person to unravel an unspoken policy of what not to share and to share. Each group needs to decide what they want to protect, what they want to share with the public and when to censure those stepping out of line, both Native and non-Native alike. Yes, this is a bit over the top but when we are dealing with cultural knowledge and intellectual property rights, and as these issues become part of our discussion, individual groups will have the ability to manage what is shared and not. Sadly or ironically camps that are successful have been taken over by non-Natives who are able to understand the cultural challenges that come up in such a camp.

Here is an obvious but disturbing point; take a look at how the Hawaiian and Finnish Saami cultures are used by the tourist industry. Conduct a web search and you see how they are used as Indigenous cultures to attract tourists to their area. Yes, the main attraction for Hawaii is the climate, however the use of Native dancers is second nature to most images used in promoting Hawaii for tourism. The Finnish Saami, not as well known here in the US, are known across Europe and fall under a similar category. You can take a winter tour to experience riding on a Saami sled, sit in their tents, etc... and never meet a person of Saami heritage. Both groups at some point have become voiceless actors in an industry that is looking at production and not the actual product.

Cultural tourism depends on the current situation of the culture being shared and the individuals actively engaged in this process. It is a double edged sword that can either work for the benefit or demise of a culture. For generations indigenous cultures have been told to forget their past, move into the now and live in a modern fashion. Today they are told the opposite, embrace your heritage, history and knowledge, but at a cost. In doing this you have to live in two worlds, traditional and modern, in order to survive. How can Indigenous peoples then balance a traditional and contemporary way of life? One such alternative is combining their cultural ways and tourism to make a living. It is a balance that does not come easy. Become too successful and you are seen as selling out and becoming white, but fail and you are seen as being Native. The catch is a double standard that is perpetuated and maintained by success and failure. Yet time and time again I have seen most individuals are set up for failure because of cultural clashes and misunderstandings that are perpetuated by non-Native and Natives alike. When Natives are successful they are envied and despised by their peers, when they fail they are pitied and shunned by outsiders.

Researchers, scholars, policy makers and other indigenous peoples need to think hard about how and what they write about Natives. Their work is more readily accessible to the public and can be used by policy makers and the tourist industry that can either work for or against a group. It is important that we are aware of what we write, discuss and share with the general public. Being Native doesn't give me the right say or write whatever I feel fit. I have to be aware of who and how I am impacting those I am writing about and their lives. Who are the indigenous peoples that our work will impact? How are they promoting and perpetuating their own culture? How are they dealing with the fact that for several centuries they were discouraged from continuing their cultural ways to now how they are told the opposite? Where is each group at in their self-awareness of their history, heritage and situation in the world?

Comments:

What I see happening across Alaska is twofold. First the last two generations have become better educated, have experienced and understand the outside world and are now better equipped to balance the challenges they

are facing with the increasing numbers of outsiders coming into their regions. Across Alaska you can find in rural communities many adults whose children have gone or are attending college, taken voc-ed and or other types of specialized training. In this case higher Education has been very successful.

The down fall of this increased awareness and understanding of the outside world is the loss of knowing their culture, speaking their language and learning the traditional ways of living and seeing the world. The latter points play a very important role in how Natives can and should protect their region and culture. For centuries they learned to understand how to live with the land, not off the land. How to utilize everything they harvested from local resources without over exploitation. Today Native children are not being taught this because we have been taught that they should and must understand the outside world to survive. What

happens when our children want return without a sense of place, sense of respect for what once was and a sense of self-respect and reliance to be able to survive where it once was common knowledge. I am not suggesting that we drop everything and go back to our traditional ways, it is too late to do this.

What I hope could happen is for each culture to acknowledge that this has and still continues to happen and for them to actively, not verbally, take action to reverse this process. We need to acknowledge that the two ways of learning (Traditional and European) are vastly different from each other and don't work together. This contradiction of learning has left a huge void in most of us and we need to find a way to bridge the two world-views together so that we can live healthier lives and ensure that our cultural legacies are not lost as our world becomes smaller.